



## Persona and the Cinema of Interpretation

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Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 211. Nichols makes no claims to resolve the problematic nature of the place of the viewer in the Wiseman text but argues that the recent materialist critique of the realist text cannot be applied simply to dismiss the films because of their self-effacing style: "Although Wiseman's films are not self-reflexive in a formalist or political (Brechtian) sense, neither are they simple transparencies of a bourgeois world that we, as spectators, passively contemplate" (p. 235). As I shall argue later in this paper, *Model*, which appeared after Nichols wrote the above passage, takes up the project of resolving these structural tensions through a self-reflexive text which places the viewer unambiguously beyond the imaginary relationship and the realm of the "merely enjoyable" or pleasurable.

4. See Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," ed. Pat Walker, *Between Labor and Capital* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), pp. 5-45. Rejecting the traditional Marxist two-class model of capitalism as inadequate for an understanding of late capitalism, the Ehrenreichs define the place and function of the PMC in the social formation in precisely the ways that Wiseman captures in his cinema: to reproduce capitalist culture and capitalist class relations. For example, Wiseman's most Marxist works—the Lukacsian *Meat* and the Althusserian *Model*—neatly "cover" the two major divisions within the PMC that the Ehrenreichs

describe, suggesting much about the complex nature of social control through ideological consent in the inter-related processes of production and consumption.

5. For a full discussion of *Basic Training* as a sequel to *High School* and a parody of the educational process see Richard Fuller, "Basic Training," *Frederick Wiseman*, Thomas R. Atkin, ed. (New York: Monarch Press, 1976), pp. 103-112.

6. See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Viking Press, 1973) and the film by the same title, particularly part four, "Painting and Advertising" and Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

7. Warren I. Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," in J. Highman & P. K. Conklin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 217-218.

8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans., Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), p. 235.

9. Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1978), pp. 204-205. Quoted in Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 81.

DAVID BOYD

# Persona and the Cinema of Interpretation

It's nearly twenty years now since Susan Sontag issued her famous diatribe "Against Interpretation," concluding with the claim that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."<sup>1</sup> However controversial at the time, Sontag's manifesto had little immediate impact on academic criticism (presumably most academics preferred to reserve "erotics" as an extracurricular pursuit). But the academy has found it less easy to ignore more recent urgings, like those of Jonathan Culler, for instance, that critical studies should progress "Beyond Interpretation"<sup>2</sup> to an examination of the conditions that make interpretation possible.

Probably the most radical challenge to the interpretive *status quo* in recent years, however, has been posed by the emergence of deconstructive criticism. Deconstruction has made itself felt most forcefully, in fact, not as a metaphysic or anti-metaphysic, but pre-

cisely as an alternative to interpretation. Jacques Derrida's claim that "the absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely"<sup>3</sup> has served most influentially to legitimize a different form of textual analysis, one which replaces the quest for a single determinate meaning with "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself."<sup>4</sup>

These various challenges have not gone unresisted, of course. One of the more ingenious, if ultimately limited, defenses of the value and necessity of interpretation has been offered by Naomi Schor, who points out that interpretation is not exclusively the concern of critics, but frequently an obsession shared by artists, as well. Basing her argument on such pivotal writers of the early modern period as James, Proust, and Kafka, Schor contends that if "interpretation is viewed not as something that is done *to* fiction but rather as



something that is done *in* fiction, then to be against interpretation becomes an untenable position, for it is tantamount to rejecting a considerable amount of (modern) fiction that is explicitly, indeed insistently, concerned with interpretation: its scope and its limits, its necessity and its frustrations.”<sup>5</sup>

As an argument in defense of interpretation, this is really rather thin, but it does open up an interesting area of inquiry. And one, what’s more, that’s at least as relevant to film studies as to literary studies. Because there is, of course, a considerable body of film that is just as “explicitly, indeed insistently, concerned with interpretation.”<sup>6</sup> Some of the more obvious instances come to mind almost immediately: *Rashomon*, *Blow-Up*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Citizen Kane*, *8½*, any number of Hitchcock’s films (*Vertigo*, *Rear Window*), and so on and so forth. All of these films force upon the viewer, narratively and thematically, a self-conscious awareness of his or her own interpretive activity, and many of them do so affectively, as well, in that they tend to be, as Naomi Schor terms Kafka’s novels, “‘hysterical’ texts (hysterical in the sense that they seem to invite rape, while

denying penetration).” Or, in less sexist terms, they characteristically invoke “the hermeneutic double-bind: the absolute necessity to interpret goes hand in hand with the total impossibility to validate interpretation.”<sup>6</sup>

If the existence of this cinema of interpretation is incontestable, the sort of critical use to which it might best be put is not. Naomi Schor assumes that the interpretive fictions which she discusses were intended, and must be accepted, as general models, either exemplary or cautionary, that “via the interpretant [that is, the character within the narrative action engaged in some sort of interpretive activity] the author is trying to tell the interpreter something *about* interpretation and the interpreter would do well to listen and take note.”<sup>7</sup> But there is another way of approaching a fiction of interpretation, whether literary or cinematic. Instead of allegorizing it as an image of the interpretive process in general, we can attempt to relate it to our own interpretation of the particular text itself. And instead of assuming that the interpretive fiction should be regarded as a privileged model, that Kafka will teach us how to read *The Trial*, or Kurosawa how to read *Rashomon*, as Fielding

teaches us how to read *Tom Jones* (and how, according to the orthodox view, we must read it), we can place the interpretation *within* the text and our own interpretation *of* the text in an ongoing dialectical relationship.

The working out of this dialectic can potentially lead to a more complex understanding of the text, of our own critical practice, and, perhaps most interestingly, of the relationship between the two. For the interpretation of an interpretive fiction necessarily constitutes a paradigmatic instance of the process through which an interpretation “not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it.”<sup>8</sup> This “displaced reenactment of a text’s scenario”<sup>9</sup> is, of course, only very rarely a *literal* reenactment. Instances, like Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, of fictions explicitly concerned with the interpretation of other fictions are few and far between. More frequently, fictions of interpretation operate through various interpretive metaphors. In the case of the cinema of interpretation, the most obvious of these metaphors is the attempt to choose among various contradictory accounts of a single narrative event, the effort, by viewer and character alike, to determine what “really” happened in the woods in *Rashomon*, or in the park in *Blow-Up*, or *Last Year at Marienbad*, or whatever.

Paradoxically, our own interpretive practice is sometimes most clearly illuminated by such a metaphor precisely at the point at which it begins to break down. The widely felt dissatisfaction with the conclusion of *Rashomon*, for instance, arises not only from its sentimentality, but also from just such a breakdown of the interpretive metaphor which has largely structured our previous understanding of the film. Invited at the end to believe the one character whom we know for a certainty to have lied (because he alone provides two contradictory versions of the past), we are forced to a belated recognition of two problematic aspects of the entire metaphor: first, that we have been asked to ground our interpretation of the text in the supposition of a pretext (that *something* “really happened” in the woods), whereas the pre-text, of course, derives its own “reality,” its very existence, solely from the text; and second, that we have been expected to privilege certain sections of the text ontologically, declare them more “real” than

others, whereas all are equally real, equally unreal, equally fictive, and the entire effect of the film has depended on the ability of film “to confer on all events, without indications to the contrary, an equivalent degree of reality: everything shown on the screen is *there*, present.”<sup>10</sup>

Under the pressure of such contradictions, a chasm opens up between the interpretive situation inside the text and outside it, between the interpretant on the screen and the interpreter in the audience. This gap, furthermore, exposes not only the basic limitations of the interpretive metaphor on which the film has been based, but also the theoretically unresolved problems that underlie our interpretive practice in general: first, the unavailability of a pre-text, a prior reality, in which to ground our interpretation of the text (the problem, in other words, of the referentiality of fiction); and second, the difficulty of explaining one part of the text by reference to another, since everything within the text is equally in need of interpretation (the problem of the hermeneutic circle).

So this sort of metaphorical breakdown ultimately signals an underlying theoretical scandal. It places in jeopardy, not just a particular interpretation of a particular text, but rather the very possibility of interpretation. For some critical approaches, however, this situation presents itself, not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity. The same sort of breakdown which might seem to threaten an end to interpretation can equally well afford a beginning to deconstruction, to the rhetorical analysis of the text in order to reveal the ways in which it renders itself susceptible to incompatible, but equally legitimate, interpretations.

The cinema of interpretation as a whole therefore presents itself as an obvious opportunity for deconstructive inquiry. But there are differences of degree. Even if we accept the somewhat dogmatic insistency of J. Hillis Miller that all texts self-deconstruct and do so knowingly, that “Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of the text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself,”<sup>11</sup> some texts nevertheless dismantle themselves a good deal more insistently than others. Few do so more spectacularly than *Persona*, or so render themselves more invul-

nerable, apparently, to conventional interpretive attack.

Even within Naomi Schor's category of "hysterical" texts, *Persona* constitutes a particularly striking case of a text which, after repeated critical violations, remains curiously intact. Nothing approaching a critical consensus seems to have been achieved on even the most local issues. John Simon reports, for instance, that Elizabeth "prayerfully contemplates" the photograph from the Warsaw ghetto, Robin Wood that she studies it "with fascinated horror," and Birgitta Steene that she views it "with perfect calm," that it "arouses no visible reaction in her."<sup>12</sup> One explanation for this marked lack of an interpretive consensus is that most critics actually interpret, not the film, but rather their own prior interpretation of the film, a "constructed version, half 'story' and half 'meaning'," as Susan Sontag says, from which they then "read off a number of further meanings. Some regard the transactions between Elizabeth and Alma as illustrating some impersonal law which operates intermittently in human affairs; no ultimate responsibility pertains to either of them. Others posit a conscious cannibalism of the innocent Alma by the actress—and thus read the film as a parable of the predatory energies of the artist forever scavenging for 'material.' Other critics move quickly to an even more general plane, and extract from *Persona* a diagnosis of the contemporary dissociation of personality, a demonstration of the inevitable failure of goodwill and trust, and predictably correct views on such matters as the alienated affluent society, the nature of madness, psychiatry and its limitations, the American War in Vietnam, the Western legacy of sexual guilt, and the Six Million."<sup>13</sup>

No doubt some of these readings well justify Sontag's acidic tone, but perhaps the tendency of critics so consistently to interpret their own interpretations of the film is understandable in view of the position it holds within the cinema of interpretation. One of the characteristic shot-compositions of *Persona* is the close-up in which one head is turned towards the side of the frame, while another faces directly out at the audience. Such shots might serve as emblems of the film's peculiarly insistent positioning of itself at the intersection of the diegetic axis (the relationship of charac-

ter and character) and the affective axis (the relationship of viewer and film), and as reminders that an interpretive drama is being played out along each of these axes. All fictions are actually located at such an intersection, of course, and all fictions of interpretation more or less explicitly so. The peculiarities of *Persona* arise from the precise nature of the parallel difficulties encountered by interpreter and interpretant in their respective dramas.

The first such difficulty is simply that of establishing the relationship between the two. Normally, the identification of the interpreter with the interpretant is absolutely basic to the entire appeal of fictions of interpretation. "If there existed a barometer capable of measuring the narcissistic gratification afforded by literary works," Naomi Schor says, "then fictions of interpretation would push the needle way over, for what could comfort and delight the interpreter more than to find the interpretant, his specular image, shimmering on the printed page [or, in this case, even more literally shimmering on the screen], mirroring his confusions as well as his triumphs."<sup>14</sup> In *Persona*, however, such narcissistic gratification proves increasingly hard to come by, as the interpreter's identification *with* the interpretant is repeatedly subverted by his uncertainty concerning the identification *of* the interpretant.

Initially, the structure of the interpretive situation seems clear enough: since Elizabeth is immediately established as the patient, the puzzle, the problem to be solved, it necessarily follows that Alma must be the interpretant, and it is with Alma, accordingly, that we initially identify. And this identification plays a crucial role in structuring our experience of the first half of the film, that section of the film to which many viewers and critics subsequently cling so desperately because of the apparent familiarity of its fictional rhetoric and, in particular, as Robin Wood puts it, because of the absence, for the most part, of anything "to distance or distract us from a moral and psychological exploration of the characters and their relationships, via the emotional-intellectual processes through which we customarily experience fictional narratives."<sup>15</sup> Problematic scenes, like those in which Elizabeth may or may not speak to



Alma, and may or may not visit Alma's room by night, scenes which are problematic precisely because they *do* threaten "to distance or distract us from a moral and psychological exploration of the characters and their relationships," are typically dealt with by interpreting them as part of Alma's subjective experience, placing quotation marks around them. The uncertainty is thus localized and contained; the problem is Alma's, not ours. In this way, the viewer's identification with Alma plays an essential part in establishing that hierarchy of discourses which Colin McCabe has argued is the dominant feature of the classic realist text.<sup>16</sup>

In the latter part of the film, of course, this hierarchy of discourses becomes increasingly difficult, and ultimately impossible, to maintain. But its eventual breakdown in the second half of the film is prepared for in the first half by the progressive subversion of Alma's position as identification figure and the gradual emergence of Elizabeth as an unexpected rival for the role. The viewer can scarcely fail to note, for instance, that during the longest sequence in this part of the film, Alma's monologue about the orgy on the beach, it is Elizabeth who serves as his surrogate on screen, sitting as a silent spectator in the dark. And this change of status on Elizabeth's part is even more clearly signalled at the beginning of the following sequence, when she suddenly pops up into the unoccupied frame and points her own camera out at the audience. Along both axes of the film, the previously assumed relationship of subject and object, observer and observed, interpreter and text, is unmistakably under challenge.

Within the interpretive drama on screen,

this challenge culminates in the scene in which Alma reads Elizabeth's letter to the psychiatrist. In opening the letter, Alma is asserting the prerogatives of the interpreter, but the contents of the letter immediately rob her of those prerogatives. For she now finds herself a text to be read, the object of shared speculation by the two professional interpreters, the actress and the psychiatrist. And at the same time, her prior monopoly on the power of articulation is usurped. Thus divested of her role of interpreter, in the following scene with the broken glass she renounces her other defining role as well, that of carer. By this point, the essential terms on which the relationship between Alma and Elizabeth was originally established have been utterly shattered, and this is reflected along the other axis of the film by a perfectly literal rupture, the simulated breakdown of the projector.

As the image gradually refocuses after that breakdown, an attempt is initially made to reconstitute the drama on the previous terms. But that attempt inevitably fails, and a few scenes later, at the end of Alma's repeated monologue about Elizabeth and her son, the film is literally ruptured a second time, this time vertically instead of horizontally, with the split-screen fusion of the two faces. For Alma, with the integrity and autonomy of her established identity under threat, this moment clearly marks the most powerful *aporia*, the most acute moment of puzzlement, in her interpretive drama.

The repetition of this entire monologue is so extravagant a rhetorical figure, however, that it resists reading in purely diegetic terms. It can be read that way, admittedly. Alfred Guzzetti has rightly insisted that the repetition does not impair the *syntactical* intelligibility of the scene; most viewers, that is, presumably realize that, on the level of what Guzzetti calls "deep structure," the two monologues are identical, rather than successive. And no doubt it can be rendered *thematically* intelligible, as well, either as simply one more indication of "the director's concern elsewhere in this work with the processes of cinema and representation,"<sup>17</sup> as Guzzetti sees it, or as signalling, in Robin Wood's words, "Alma's gradual realization that in taking over Elizabeth's mind she becomes Elizabeth, and thus is talking about herself—that the cruelty she

is denouncing is something within *her* . . .”<sup>18</sup> But surely this *aporia* should share something of Alma’s puzzlement. If the central procedure of deconstruction is, as Derrida describes it, a double-reading which simultaneously acknowledges the legibility of a text and demonstrates the text’s inevitable subversion of that legibility, there could scarcely be a more literal and explicit invitation to such a reading than the repeated monologue.

What such a double-reading serves to expose is an interpretive ambiguity which ultimately informs *Persona* as a whole. On first telling, and on first reading, the story of Elizabeth’s relationship with her son is accepted at face value. Blocking out commonsensical doubts about how Alma could possibly be privy to such secrets, we gratefully seize upon the story as an “explanation” of the present in terms of the past, of Elizabeth’s present state in terms of her past history. But on second telling, and second reading, an alternative interpretation presents itself: that Alma is not revealing Elizabeth’s history, but rather inventing it, extrapolating a past out of her interpretation of Elizabeth’s present.

What is really involved in this double-reading is a tension between what Jonathan Culler describes as two fundamentally opposed narrative logics: “One may maintain the primacy of the event: it took place at the appropriate moment and determined subsequent events and their significance. Or one can maintain that the structures of signification, the discursive requirements, work to produce a fictional or topological event.”<sup>19</sup> The emergence of this alternative narrative logic, as Cynthia Chase has said in discussing its operation in *Daniel Deronda*, implies not merely “a violation of genre conventions or of *vraisemblance* but a deconstruction of cause. . . . It is a chiasmus or a metalepsis, a reversal of the temporal status of cause and effect: cause is relocated in the present and effect in the past.”<sup>20</sup>

This alternative logic suggested by a double-reading of the repeated monologue immediately makes available similar double-readings of other sections of the film as well. The immediately preceding scene in which Alma makes love to Elizabeth’s husband, for instance, is just as plausibly read as the production, by the “discursive requirements” of the dramatic situation, of “a fictional or topological

event.” That is, unlike the case in Strindberg’s *The Stronger*, which has been widely cited as a probable influence on the film, the sexual conflict in *Persona* is not a prior fact of causality, but rather is predicated by the interpretive demands of the situation. The “cause,” the “explanation,” conventionally expected for a conflict like that of Alma and Elizabeth is a sexual triangle, and such a triangle is, therefore, belatedly produced.

Once the process of double-reading is initiated, however, its ultimate effects extend much further than this. It subverts, indeed, the putative stability of the entire first half of the film by revealing that, if less obviously ambiguous than the second half, it is nevertheless just as susceptible to genuinely radical reinterpretation. Some sort of reinterpretation of the earlier part of the film is necessitated by the very attempt to recuperate the later part, to render it once more conventionally interpretable. Most critics respond to the possibility that Alma is inventing a past for Elizabeth by unwittingly emulating her procedure and themselves inventing, or extrapolating, a past for Alma, as well. Specifically, the event in Alma’s past frequently cited as “explaining” the repeated monologue is her abortion, the “cause,” presumably, of that guilt which she now projects onto Elizabeth.

The problem is that once the seed of suspicion has been planted, its growth cannot be contained. All that we know of what has now retrospectively emerged as a crucial event, Alma’s abortion, we know only by means of her own narration. But if Alma’s version of Elizabeth’s past is susceptible to double-reading, why should her version of her own past, the orgy monologue, be exempt from a similar reading? Indeed, in a film in which intrusions from the “real” world are authenticated, in large part, by their very fragmentariness (the television newsclip of the burning monk, the photograph from the Warsaw ghetto), narrative set-pieces like both of Alma’s monologues are almost automatically suspect simply by virtue of their completeness and circumstantial detail.

But there are more specific grounds for suspicion, as well, in the actual content of the orgy monologue, which is as easily interpreted in terms of self-creation as in terms of self-revelation. It can just as legitimately be read,

that is, as a narrative performance on Alma's past, extrapolating a past out of the materials of the present, the physical details and the emotional structures. In Alma's story, she and Katrina are lying on the beach, as she and Elizabeth were in the preceding scene, wearing the large straw hats that she and Elizabeth wore in the scene before that. In the story, the boys serve primarily to channel the sexual energy flowing between the two women, as Elizabeth's husband subsequently serves to express obliquely the relationship between Elizabeth and Alma. In the scene that Alma describes, Katrina lies beside her on the sand, voyeuristically observing her sexual performance, while in the scene on screen Elizabeth lies on the bed "as if absorbing the narrated sexual experiences into her own body."<sup>21</sup>

Presumably one reason that such precise parallels fail to arouse the suspicions of most viewers is the sheer intensity of Bibi Anderson's performance; she acts so powerfully that we assume Alma cannot be acting at all. But the film subsequently provides both the interpretant and the interpreter with reason to doubt the reliability of judgments based on performances. For just as the viewer takes Bibi Anderson's performance during the orgy monologue as sanctioning an interpretation of Alma's behavior as uncontrolled self-revelation, so Elizabeth's performance during the same scene is taken by Alma as sanctioning an interpretation of Elizabeth's response as one of compassionate concern. But Elizabeth's letter, of course, reveals just how mistaken Alma's interpretation really was and inevitably casts doubt upon our own as well.

What all this amounts to is not an argument for the re-interpretation of this particular scene, but, just the opposite, evidence of the essential futility of the entire process of re-interpretation. This double-reading of Alma's first monologue originated, after all, in the attempt to resolve the interpretive difficulties posed by the double-reading of her second monologue. In the light of the attempted re-interpretation, though, the repeated monologue still remains obstinately double. The alternative reading of that monologue (that Alma is projecting herself onto, rather than into, Elizabeth) has proven to be neither more nor less plausible, neither better nor worse grounded, than the first (that the events of the mono-

logue "really happened" and that they "explain" Elizabeth's subsequent behavior). "The deconstructive operation," as Cynthia Chase insists, "while it consists in pointing out that the concept of causality amounts to an aberrant and arbitrary ordering of rhetorical elements, is itself no more than an equally aberrant reordering of these elements, the performance of another tropological operation. It is for this special reason that a deconstruction is not a refutation, or that a deconstructive 'refutation' can claim for itself no more authority than the refuted concept."<sup>22</sup>

But it claims no *less* authority, either. It leaves the interpreter faced with two equally legitimate interpretations and no apparent grounds for choosing between them. And instead of resolving their tension, the attempted re-interpretation actually compounds it. The first double-reading leads to a second, and the hope of resolution recedes like the horizon. And so it inevitably must, for "while any act of interpretation must posit something as given," as Culler says, "this given is not a fixed center around which all interpretations turn but rather a product of other interpretations which take something else as given."<sup>20</sup> So the process of re-interpretation necessarily proves either circular or infinitely regressive.

The regressive search for interpretive grounds can admittedly be pursued much further than we have so far in the hope of locating some ultimate and unproblematical given from which all else is derived and in terms of which all else can be explained, some final point of rest. And in the case of *Persona*, the regressive movement does ultimately lead to what might well seem an absolute of sorts. For a single instant at the beginning of the film we do confront an image that seems genuinely unproblematical, ontologically pure, beyond interpretation. The *fiat lux* with which the film begins is absolutely literal, an image neither more nor less than what it seems to be: a light shining on the screen.

Even for that instant, though, the audience waits impatiently for this image to resolve itself into a sign, a representation of something else. When it does so, the light transforms itself into a representation of its own origins, the lighting of the arc lamp, thus redirecting our attention from the front of the auditorium to the rear. And so, in the very



first instant of signification, we find ourselves positioned, quite literally, in the space opened up between the constituent parts of this first sign, the signifier on the screen in front of us, the signified in the box behind. At the same time, this shift from sensation to representation opens up a temporal space as well. For the shot of the lighting of the arc lamp is a representation of something not only other than itself, but also necessarily prior to itself, the lighting of the real lamp which enables the representation to be seen. The preceding image, consequently, is revealed as less absolute a beginning than it seemed. The first image of the film announces that it is beginning, but is the first sign that it had already begun.

The beginning of the physical event of the film represented by the lighting of the lamp, however, is itself quickly revealed as no more absolute a point of origin than the beginning of the perceptual event signalled by the initial nonrepresentative image, for it is immediately succeeded by reminders of a whole series of further "beginnings": the clip from the silent farce points to the beginnings of film art, the shot of a nail being driven into a hand to the beginning of a religious and cultural tradition, the systematic construction of a sense of place from a succession of shots to the beginnings of a narrative mode.

Bergman himself has claimed that the entire opening sequence is concerned with the film's *authorial* beginnings, that it is "a poem, not in words, but in images, about the situation in which *Persona* had originated. I reflected on what was important, and began with the projector and my desire to set it in motion. But when the projector was running, nothing came out of it but old ideas, the spider, God's lamb, all that dull old stuff."<sup>24</sup> Certainly much of this sequence is unmistakably a pastiche of references to earlier Bergman films: the silent farce is actually footage from *Prison*, the spider alludes to the spider-god of *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light*, the sheep entrails and knife to the mad animal-killer in *The Passion of Anna*, the crucifixion to *The Seventh Seal*.<sup>25</sup> And finally, and most obviously, the boy who appears at the beginning and end of the film appeared three years earlier in *The Silence* (even reading the same book in that film, Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*).

Bergman has further claimed that the boy represents himself as author and that the scene with the boy alludes to his earliest work on the screenplay of *Persona* during a period of hospitalization. Even if we accept this clue, however, and agree to read the boy as a surrogate for Bergman, as many critics do, the effect is not to ground the subsequent fiction in a sense of immediate authorial presence, but rather, precisely the opposite, to dispossess the author of his own text. For the boy is presented from the very beginning as a fellow-interpreter, trying to make sense of images on a screen, as he was last seen in *The Silence* struggling to puzzle out the meaning of words in a foreign language. And an interpreter he remains to the very end, never even vaguely approaching the sort of authorial control that Fellini's surrogate, for instance, belatedly assumes at the end of *8½*. Whatever its origins, the scene with the boy, and for that matter the entire opening sequence, more obviously presents itself as an allegory of reception than of creation.

The eagerness of many critics to read this sequence as an authorial preface is perfectly understandable, though, since it seems to offer a further avenue along which the regressive search for interpretive grounds can be continued. If such grounds are unavailable within the text, then possibly they can be sought out in the authorial pre-text, in Bergman's stated or assumed intention, or in the evolving shape of his career. But ultimately there is simply no textual justification for privileging the authorial element in the opening sequence in this way. The sequence can serve as well, or better, to remind us that *Persona* is located, not just at a particular point in a particular authorial career, but rather at the intersection of the various histories of an art, an artist, a narrative mode, a cultural tradition, a technological apparatus, a physical event, and no one of these histories can claim any obvious priority over the others.

All of them are threads, among many others, drawn together in the textual web. This image of the web figures as prominently in the rhetoric of deconstructive criticism as that of the well-wrought urn once did in the "new criticism," the vision of the text as "a spatialized tapestry of interlocking threads (for example, words, images, characters, themes), . . .

constituted as level, meaning that no point or passage can rise above any other. Nothing can be privileged: there may be no origin, no end, no focus, no priority element, no sovereign principle."<sup>26</sup> And since there are no secrets hidden in or behind this web, since the secret, rather, is the web itself, "everything is to be *disentangled*," as Barthes says, "nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath . . ."<sup>27</sup>

In reality, of course, no reading of any text, whether interpretive *or* deconstructive, ever really manages to run the thread at *every* point and *every* level. The deconstructive reading will inevitably itself have an origin, an end, a priority element of sorts, even if it denies them to the text. But if it is to be consistent, whatever aspect of the text to which the deconstructive critic directs his attention, whichever loose thread he chooses to pull, must itself be denied any privileged status. In this instance, I began by appropriating the narrative action of *Persona* as a fiction of interpretation, an appropriation either justified or not by the possibilities it subsequently opened up. But defining Alma in the role of interpretant clearly no more exhausts her potential significance within the text than any of the various roles by which she seeks to define herself. Because the drama of interpretation is, of course, only one part of the larger drama played out along the diegetic axis of the film.

Exactly the same thing can be said of the drama played out along the affective axis as well. For the purposes of articles like this one, I assume a *persona* as clearly as Alma does. I call myself "the audience," "the viewer," "the critic," "the interpreter," or sometimes "we." As Alma in her role of nurse pretends to be motivated solely by solicitude for her patient, so I in my role of interpreter pretend to be motivated solely by disinterested curiosity about the text. "I'm Sister Alma," she says to Elizabeth, "I'm here to take care of you," "I'm Dr. Boyd," I say to the film, "I'm here to understand you." But as I sit in the dark and listen to Bibi Anderson describe an orgy on a beach, my mind is scarcely occupied wholly with problems of critical understanding. Other dramas are played out along both axes of the film, dramas of power and pleasure,

as well as knowledge. Like any viewer of the film, I ("the audience," "the viewer," "the critic," "the interpreter") am not "an ideal spectator who comes to the film innocently cleansed of the contagion of other films and other practices," in John Caughie's words, but rather an amalgam of "subjects other than the purely textual subject—social subjects, sexual subjects, historical subjects—subjects who are constituted in a plurality of discourses (in an intertextuality of other texts) of which the single text is only one moment."<sup>28</sup>

Paradoxically, furthermore, it is only when these other subjects are permitted to come into play, when the interpreter ceases to be solely an interpreter, that he is enabled to make interpretive decisions at all. Not only enabled, in fact, but compelled. The stance of stringent scepticism and complete relativism adopted for the purposes of deconstructive analysis is necessarily a purely theoretical one. For "while relativism is a position that one can entertain," as Stanley Fish puts it, "it is not a position one can occupy. No one can *be* a relativist, because no one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions that would result in their being no more authoritative *for him* than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or, for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold."<sup>29</sup>

In the real world, then, where real viewers watch real films, rather than the theoretical realm in which "the critic" engages "the text," there is never the slightest possibility of deconstructive criticism entailing an end to interpretation, not even for the deconstructive critic himself. The hermeneutic imperative *is* an imperative; the drama of interpretation goes on. But by exposing the inevitable absence of adequate grounds for interpretive choice within the text, deconstruction performs a necessary function within a larger and more ambitious critical project, by forcing us to a closer scrutiny of the real conditions (ideological, psychological, methodological) under which that complex drama is actually performed.

## NOTES

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DAVID PAUL and SYLVIA GLOVER

# The Difficulty of Moral Choice: Zanussi's *Contract* and *The Constant Factor*

One of the unacknowledged ironies about Poland during the past decade and a half is that Krzysztof Zanussi's star rose simultaneously with that of Edward Gierek. One year after the release of Zanussi's first feature film, *The Structure of Crystals* (*Struktura kryształu*, 1969), Gierek became First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' (Communist) Party. There, however, the parallelism of these two careers ended. Gierek's rule, ushered in by violence in the Baltic shipyards, sputtered through ten years of intensifying economic and political problems before ending in disgrace amid the workers' movement of 1980. Meanwhile, Zanussi had been writing and directing films that, as the seventies wore on,

probed gradually more and more deeply into the moral fabric of the society underlying Gierek's regime. What Zanussi found there—corruption, disillusionment, and a generally confused set of public values—was subtly but startlingly depicted in his movies, particularly *Illumination* (*Iluminacja*, 1973) and *Camouflage* (*Barwy ochronne*, 1976).

In 1980, the year of Gierek's downfall and the abortive political "renewal," Zanussi completed two films that in many respects marked the culmination of his concern with the question of moral choice. *Contract* (*Kontrakt*), made for television and aired prior to the workers' strikes, hit hard at a theme the Solidarity unionists would later sound:

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## **Notes**

### <sup>8</sup> **Turning the Screw of Interpretation**

Shoshana Felman

*Yale French Studies*, No. 55/56, Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise. (1977), pp. 94-207.

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### <sup>26</sup> **The Lateral Dance: The Deconstructive Criticism of J. Hillis Miller**

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